British Waterways

HISTORY OF THE INLAND WATERWAYS

Water has been used for transport since primitive times - for carrying goods and ferrying people. At first rivers were used, but rivers can meander and be unpredictable - with shallows or rapids, or subject to flooding or drought. Basic weirs were constructed to deepen reaches of river and provide a consistent water flow. By placing gates in them boats could flow through downstream, but they had to be hauled up-river. This was the beginning of canal technology.

The world's first canal was probably built by King Menes in Upper Egypt c.4,000BC. In Britain, the Romans created navigations such as the Fossdyke while the short Exeter Canal was first cut in 1566. It wasn't until the late eighteenth century, however, that Britain acquired the unique network of canals and river navigations that we know today.

Canals were Britain's first transport system and underpinned the success of the Industrial Revolution. The first canal of the 'Canal Age' was the Sankey Brook (St Helen's Canal) of 1757, closely followed in 1761 by the famous Bridgewater Canal, built by the enterprising Duke of Bridgewater to carry coal from his mines at Worsely to the markets of Manchester. The roads of the day were poor and one horse hauling a laden canal boat could carry far more than pack animals - and do so more quickly and safely. So successful was the Duke's canal that many followed his example.

By 1793, the country was in the grip of 'Canal Mania' as rich and poor alike clamoured to invest in the new canals that would make them rich. Speculation in canal building schemes reached its zenith with, in just two years, 37 Acts for the construction of new canals passed by Parliament. Meetings to enlist subscribers to new canal projects were held all over the country, in pubs and halls, attended by hopeful investors who had travelled great distances in the expectation of making a quick killing. Such was the overwhelming demand that promoters were driven to arrange decoy gatherings to divert attention.

We can only imagine the impact on 18th century Britain, for it is doubtful that anything like it (with the possible exception of the arrival of the railways) has since rivalled the upheaval that followed.

Pioneering engineers were the heroes of the age, building structures never attempted before: waterways were carried across valleys on high aqueducts, climbed slopes by means of inclined planes or flights of locks, and were conveyed through hills in tunnels.

A network of canals soon joined city to city and countryside to town. From 1760 to 1840, the transport arteries of the nation were constructed; at its greatest extent the inland waterway network stretched to over 5,000 miles and carried 30 million tonnes of goods and raw materials across Britain every year. Almost all the major cities and towns had a canal: from London to Lancaster and from Wales to the Wash.

In just 30 years it became possible to move large cargoes over great distances. The consequence for Britain's mainly agrarian society was rapid and far-reaching. Industries, once small-scale and reliant on exhaustible local sources, were able now to import limitless supplies and, significantly, to grow and support ever larger communities. No longer were building materials restricted to whatever could be obtained locally; raw materials and finished goods could be conveyed between factories, warehouses and ports, and manufactured items taken to the most profitable markets. The transport arteries of the canal system have rightly been described as carrying the lifeblood of the Industrial Revolution.

Many believe that it was the railways that killed off freight on the canals, and it is true that the railways acquired many canal companies for reasons of self-interest. Freight carrying, however, continued on the narrow canals until after the Second World War and it was competition from the new motorways and the terrible winter of 1962/63 that effectively killed off most freight on the waterways.

In the meantime, passionate enthusiasts such as Tom Rolt and Robert Aickman began to highlight the threat to the waterways and the need to secure a future for them. Together with other stalwarts, they founded The Inland Waterways Association in 1946 and it is thanks to the efforts of people like these that we have a waterway network of such value today. Their involvement helped to save a priceless national treasure.

The waterways entered public ownership in 1948 under the provisions of the 1947 Transport Act. They were considered an insignificant part of the huge nationalisation of transport under the British Transport Commission. So much so that one surprised civil servant is reported to have remarked: “Oh, do we get the canals too?”

Waterways declined in this period and by the late 1960s the network had shrunk to 2,775 miles from a peak of over 5,000 in its heyday. Many canals were abandoned, filled in, or severed by new motorways.

The 1962 Transport Act created the British Waterways Board to operate the 2,000-mile inland waterway network and its associated docks and land. Later, the 1968 Transport Act gave first official recognition to the value of the inland waterways for recreation. However, there still remained the threat to those waterways that the 1968 Act so casually labelled "The Remainder" – some 600 miles in need of restoration and repair.

Long term underfunding became a way of life for the waterways. The financial rules under which British Waterways had to operate loaded the dice heavily in favour of continued decline. However, the work of bands of hardy volunteers and some enlightened local authorities saved and restored many miles of the waterway network we enjoy today.

By the mid-1990s, British Waterways and its partners were successfully making the case for increased investment in the network, as pioneering regeneration schemes began to demonstrate the economic, social and environmental potential of revitalised waterways. New funds from the European Union, development agencies and the national lottery – particularly the Millennium Commission and Heritage Lottery Fund - unlocked restoration projects, which dated back decades.

Possibly the most significant breakthrough, however, came in February 1999, with an announcement of new support and funding for British Waterways by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. 'Unlocking the Potential' committed increased funding to help British Waterways tackle its £250million safety and maintenance backlog, and enabled the organisation to develop stronger partnerships with the public, private and voluntary sectors. The subsequent publication of 'Waterways for Tomorrow' in June 2000 provided all of the UK's waterways with their first charter in more than 30 years and underlined the Government's commitment to the long-term sustainability of the network.

Partnerships with the private sector are already beginning to open up exciting new possibilities for the historic waterway network, with ventures in telecommunications, water transfer and regeneration set to ensure the waterways' long-term financial sustainability.

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At the start of the twentieth century the inland waterways of Britain had already begun a slow decline. At the start of the twenty-first century, after decades of underfunding, half a century of campaigning and more than 150 years of decline, the waterway network is at last beginning to expand and thrive

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